The Gordon Riots of 1780: London in Flames, a Nation in Ruins

Transcript

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Alcohol does have a part to play in this talk, at a certain point, a very significant part, but I want to begin with the riots of 2011. You will remember those riots, I am sure, and at that time, some commentators drew parallels with the Gordon Riots of 1780. Jonathan Jones, for example, in the Guardian newspaper, saw what he called an “eerie and striking parallel” between the two events, or a striking and eerie resemblance between engravings of the Gordon Riots, which I am going to be talking about quite a lot. I moved to Croydon shortly after the riots, and did not realise I was going to be so close to one of these iconic sites. I think what Jones had realised was that the Gordon Riots was not just an enormous destructive event, as I will be describing to you, devastating large parts of Central London, and particularly the City, around here, it was also a spectacular visual event, and this is one of the reasons for its historical impact. In the words of the poet, William Cooper, the Gordon Riots left, quote, “a metropolis in flames and a nation in ruins”.

Before I develop this theme about the spectacle of the Gordon Riots, and I must say, I am a literature professor primarily rather than a historian, so any historians in the audience may want to fire a deadly fact at me, I will outline briefly what happened during the second to ninth of June 1780.

The political background to the riots goes back a couple of years, when the Government introduced what was called the Catholic Relief Act. This new law only granted modest new rights to Catholics, primarily to do with education and owning a certain amount of property. They were still of course excluded from holding public office, a situation which did not change until 1829. But this new measure, which was partly designed to get more Catholics into the Army to fight against America – these riots take place in the middle of an unpopular war against America, the War of Independence, as we sometimes know it.

This was enough to provoke some fierce opposition from militant Protestants. The newly formed Protestant Association successfully managed to block the introduction of the new law in Scotland, and here is – it is the detail from a panel, so it is not entirely clear, but it is the Scottish Presbyterians pulling down the papists’ houses. It wasn’t as violent as the violence in London, but there still was violence.

Flushed by this success, you might say, they turned their attention to trying to get the Bill repealed in England. Under their new leader, Lord George Gordon, who gave his name – I imagine he did not want to particularly, but he gave his name to the riots, in subsequent history.

On the second of June 1780, as politicians were assembling in Parliament to discuss this issue, a very large crowd assembled outside Parliament to present a petition asking for repeal. Now, there are various estimates of the number of signatures here. Gordon claimed, at one point, 120,000. That still makes it much smaller than the Chartists’ petitions of the 1830s and 1840s. But in fact, we think the figure is more likely to be in the mid-forties, but still substantial.

Violence began on a relatively small scale, jostling and intimidation of politicians as they were going into Parliament, but when Parliament decided to not vote on the issue, to adjourn a vote – and this was very unanimous – violence then escalated later that day.

The first targets were primarily Catholic targets and Catholic sites, so, for example, chapels. This is the chapel in Golden Square, Soho, which is still standing, the Bavarian Embassy I think it was in the eighteenth Century. Lincoln’s Inn Fields as well, the Sardinian Embassy was attacked – that is no longer standing. This was followed by attacks on the properties of politicians associated with the Bill – for example, Sir George Savile, Lord Sandwich, and more importantly, Lord Mansfield, whose house in Leicester Fields, I would guess we would say Leicester Square now, was reported to have burned so intensely that it illuminated the night sky, which is a theme I am going to come back to.

When Parliament met again a few days later, on the sixth of June, and refused to debate the petition, then a new wave of destruction and violence began, and, in a way, I regard this as a second phase of the Gordon Riots. Now, the targets were not just Catholic sites of Catholicism in one way or another, but symbols of state power, including, famously, Newgate Prison, which of course was up the road where the Old Bailey is.

When the gatekeeper of Newgate Prison refused to hand over the keys so that the prisoners could be let free, the prison was set on fire and over 300 prisoners were released, at least four of whom were on Death Row.

On the same day, many other prisons were attacked. Most of the Central London prisons were attacked, and eventually, even the Bank of England was assaulted, unsuccessfully. I am never quite sure what they were going to do if they did get inside the Bank of England, quite what they were going to do is a mystery, but it is intriguing.
It seemed to many observers that this violence had now assumed new proportions, we might say revolutionary proportions or apocalyptic proportions. The annual register, for example, on the night of the seventh of June, when – and this is where the first appearance of alcohol here – when a huge distillery, owned by a Catholic called Langdale, just up the road in Holborn, when this was set on fire, the newspaper reported it was now a time of, quote, “infernal humanity, one of the most dreadful spectacles the country has ever beheld, everything served to impress the mind with ideas of universal anarchy and approaching desolation.” Dr Samuel Johnson, spoke of “a time of terror”, and Nathaniel Wraxall saw a resemblance between the Gordon Riots and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, comparing Lord George Gordon, to Wat Tyler and Jack Cade, who he referred to as “the incendiaries of the Plantagenet era”.

The City of London authorities were slow to intervene, and this later led to accusations of anti-Government collusion, but eventually, a force of around 10,000 troops arrived in the capital, and there was basically a declaration of martial law. This is somewhat disputed, but to all intents and purposes, martial law meant that troops were given the permission to fire on groups of rioters without reading the Riot Act first. As you can imagine, the result of this was carnage and hundreds of rioters killed – at least well over 200, possibly over 300, it is difficult to know, many fatally injured, hundreds and hundreds of arrests, trials of scores of people, and eventually, 25 rioters were hanged.

These dots represent the locations they were hanged at. They were meant to be hanged near where the offences had taken place. The other advantage of this map, which appears in the book, is it shows you the scale, does it not? It shows you the scale.

So, if you want to ask me about who those people who were hanged were, I am happy to tell you exactly who they were in questions. They did include several teenagers.

According to the historian John Stevenson, the Gordon Riots were unprecedented – they were the largest civil commotion in England since the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. Another historian, Robert Shoemaker, said that it was the first time that the Georgian mob, Georgian eighteenth Century mob, threatened to take over the city.

So, the scale of the riots were certainly unprecedented, but my interest is in the cultural response to the riots, as a spectacle. This is what I am going to talk about.

Contemporary media, in other words the press, print culture more generally, visual images in particular, were able to convey the colossal violence of the riots, but also I think, in this sense of spectacle, evading, in some senses, the political motivations or permutations of the riots. I have called this elsewhere, in another book I have written, the spectacular riot or kind of mythic riot, and what I have argued is all subsequent riots from this point onwards are the same, with subtle variations. There is really just one kind of riot from this point onwards, in which what is in a sense premeditated action by a quite disciplined group of rioters gets converted into a kind of anarchic, self-destructive event.

The other key aspect I am going to talk to you about in this sense of a spectacle, the sublime spectacle of the Gordon Riots, is the apocalyptic connotations. In order to try to get some sense of this devastation, people looked for historical parallels and precedents, including, biblical and classical history, but also more recent history, particularly the Great Fire of 1666. It is really those two elements, the construction of the mob and the construction of this sense of doom and apocalypse, that I want to bring together. My main sources for this are going to be some well-known images, but they have not really been discussed seriously, it seems to me, or in detail.

The first thing that strikes me about this idea of the anarchic, self-destructive mob is that, really – the key evidence for this self-destruction does not get visual representation. This is the attack, as I said, on the distillery up the road in Holborn. Now, I am reliably informed that this distillery backed onto or was very close to Gresham College itself, and so therefore the College was lucky not to have met the same fate as Langdale’s Distillery. Possibly, one reason for that is that in fact the crowd acted with quite a lot of discipline, as far as we know. For instance, they were letting fire engines through to extinguish the flames adjacent, but they targeted this building. Anyway, this has become something of a climactic scene.

Here is an account by Thomas Holcroft, under a pseudonym, William Vincent. This is one of the major sources for the Gordon Riots. Dickens drew on it, as I will show shortly, for Barnaby Rudge.

“Powder and ball do not seem to have been so fatal to the rioters as their own inordinate appetites. Numbers, it is said, and at various places, died with inebriation,” drinking is bad for you, “especially at the distilleries of the unfortunate Mr Langdale, from whose vessels the liquors ran down the middle of the street, taken up by pail-fuls and held to the mouths of the besotted multitude, many of whom killed themselves with drinking non-rectified spirits, and were burnt or buried in the ruins.”

Goodness! I see this as a form of poetic justice. I mean, I am not saying something like this did not happen – it is difficult to know, but this is a poetic justice, where these people who were setting fire to property, set fire to
themselves. They consume their own crime, in a sense, so they are themselves like non-rectified spirits. In Dickens’ words, and this is the illustration from the novel, “On this last night of the Great Riots, for the last night it was,” so it is the kind of climax, or anti-climax, “the wretched victims of a senseless outcry became themselves the dust and ashes of the flames they had kindled and strewed the public streets of London.”

This is powerful propaganda for this idea of the mindless mob, the mindless, unruly urban mob, but interestingly, the focus of the graphic prints, the engravings we have from the time, was not on this scene. It was actually on a scene where the crowd, in a sense, was at the height of its power, and this is the attack on Newgate on the sixth of June 1780. This has really become the defining image, it seems to me, of the riots, and as I will show, it is illustrated several times, within weeks, and then subsequently within months.

Although many other prisons did suffer the same fate of what the black riaer Ignatius Sancho called “martyrdom” – that was his term – it was recently constructed Newgate, with its neoclassical façade, which I think symbolised the crowd’s hatred of the Georgian bloody code. You will know, of course, there were many offences you could be hanged for, for minor offences against property at this time. They were extended hugely in the eighteenth Century, and it is true to say that, in the 1780s, there were many more people hanged than in previous decades, so it was a tightening of that power.

The sacking of the prison and the release of its prisoners, only some of whom had been arrested for rioting – it was not just directed at them – seemed to signify that the riots had grown into a potentially revolutionary struggle to overthrow Britain’s ancien régime. So, anticipating events of just nine years later, if one thinks of Paris in 1789, the burning of Newgate was, according to the historian Iain McCalman, “the apocalyptic razing of Britain’s Bastille”. So this is the Bastille of the Gordon Riots.

For spectators of the Gordon Riots, therefore, whether literally as eyewitnesses or people who consume these images, the destruction of Newgate was a demonstration of crowd power, clearly, in the same way that Dickens confessed when he was writing Barnaby Rudge that, quote, “I feel quite smoky when I am at work”, this form of sublime power of Newgate Goal delivery provided its own kind of riot for the visual imagination, it seems to me – and that is why I am a literary professor, yes, not a historian, so I can say those things.

In the dramatist Frederic Reynolds’ words, quote – he is describing the scene – “the thundering descent of huge pieces of building, the deafening clangour of red-hot iron bars striking in terrible concussion the pavement below, and the loud triumphant yells and shouts of the demoniac assailants formed an awful and terrific scene.”

We might say, like all terrific spectacles, there is a danger if you get too close to the scene and get carried away. The architect of the theory of sublime pleasure, Edmund Burke, who, by the way, himself gets assaulted on the Parliament, had to draw his sword, said this: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible, but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and are, delightful.” Burke had to put that to the test, with his sword, it seems, on his way to Parliament.

The three prints that we have showing the burning on Newgate, they are all well-known but not necessarily discussed in any detail. Going from top left round clockwise, we have – I love these titles – “The Burning and Plundering of Newgate and Setting the Felons at Liberty by the Mob”. That was published, according to the date, on the first of July 1780, so very close to the event. We have “The Devastations Occasioned by the Rioters of London, Firing the New Gaol of Newgate and Burning Mr Akerman’s Furniture, etc.” and we have “An Exact Representation” – now, whenever I see that, I think ‘pull the other one’, but anyway, “An Exact Representation of the Burning, Plundering and Destruction of Newgate by the Rioters”. Most of these prints were published from Paternoster Row, so by respectable print-sellers from up the road near St Paul’s. We do not know the prices, but I have got no reason to think it differs substantially. I have worked a lot on caricature – my next book is on romanticism and caricature. Around about a shilling maybe for a black and white version, and substantially more for a coloured version, but you could always go and see them in the print-sellers’ windows if you were lucky and not pay anything, if you hang around on the pavement, so this increased the audience significantly. These three prints define the image of the riots in the eighteenth century, until they are joined, ten years later, by an engraving of Francis Wheatley’s lost painting “Rot in Broad Street”. This is the one I have added at the bottom corner, and at the end of the talk, the last little section, I am going to talk a bit about that print, as an attempt I think to answer these earlier ones and restore some sense of order. But anyway, let us take Wheatley out of the equation for now.

The essential details here could have been gleaned from press accounts. There is no necessary sense that there had to be an artist reporter on the scene. What do we have? We have common elements: the façade of the burning Newgate forms a formidable backdrop to this cluttered crowd scene showing, among other things, released prisoners, identifiable by leg-irons, and a variety of spectators, and I will come back to that. The destructive energy of the mob is given expression in the huge bonfires, which is an interesting feature in all three scenes whose flames merge with the flames of the building, and particularly evident in the coloured version I think, very spectacular. The bright sky and the thick black smoke give an apocalyptic canopy for the social melee below. On first inspection, you might think that this does confirm an idea of an unruly mob, that there is really not much more to it. However, I think there are other readings or other interpretations possible.
To begin with, let us consider just what kind of spectacle is being staged here in front of us. Let us just pause and consider that for a moment. At one level, there is a level of theatrics to this scene, backdrop, ensemble cast, lighting effects, and I do not think that is coincidental. This might, to some extent, already undermine the idea that this is just reportage. Unlike the “Riot in Broad Street” which I think is aspiring to be like a history painting of the highest genre, this popular appeal of these Newgate prints utilise really what we might call carnival, or street theatre, to make their point. It is important that the crowd is occupying this symbolic space in front of Newgate. This would be the space that would become the place where people were executed, but at this point, it was where of course prisoners began their long journey to Tyburn tree, what is now Marble Arch, and we do have, indeed, popular figures of misrule, like this woman dancing a jig or this agitator figure playing up the crowd.

I guess you could counter what I am saying about carnival by saying, yes, but there is still stereotypically menacing elements. You cannot maybe just see them here in detail but there is a couple of black people here who seem a bit stereotypically violent, yeah? And there are various people at various states of inebriation in this scene, as there normally are in these riot scenes. However, they are busy crowd scenes, and there is a variety of characters to select for your analysis, so there are other interpretations possible.

For example, there seem to be a number of little tableaux of released prisoners maybe greeting their families, and I do not think these are caricature particularly. It may even be sympathetic.

So, what is going on here? This would probably upset someone who obviously was hostile towards the riots, but I think possibly what this tableau is getting at is this larger theme of emancipation. The Newgate crowd is at the peak of its power, and though there is some scattered violence in the scene against authority figures, though not, I do not think, against innocent bystanders, that was very unusual. I mean, in reality of course, the crowd did go around extorting money and so on, but I am talking about the construction of these scenes.

Not only, as I say, have the crowd captured that public space in front of the prison, but they had also converted it into a street theatre – at least, this is one way of thinking about it. So, for example, the trophy leg-irons, which I think you will see there, how interesting that this detail seems to echo the rather chilling, to me anyway, appearance of the same leg-irons as a decorative motif on the outside of Newgate, so it is an answer to that.

Of course, the most conspicuous details are those bonfires, where possessions and property from inside the building are being consumed. This ritual, which takes place at all the sites of the riots, where buildings are being arsoned, has not really been adequately explained, I do not think. It seems to me that this was some kind of symbolic statement, of the power of the crowd, targeting property of course rather than people, fortunately. Now, had the riots ended after the first few days, you might want to argue that what is being consumed here is symbols of Catholic idolatry, and it was still legal to confiscate icons and so on from the homes of Catholics, but once the targets of the crowd’s violence broadened out, I am not sure you can say that anymore. Once we are looking at symbols of the State, maybe that does not apply quite as much, and maybe we are looking here at the rejection of the whole ruling class culture. It is very hard to ever prove these things. Certainly one newspaper reported that “these barbarians seem to make war with the fine arts as much as with Papists”.

The most infamous example of this is the burning of Mansfield’s house, which had this very fine library – I mean, it was a tremendous loss – which was emptied into the street and set on fire. Now, it is possible that the crowd were after his law books to make a statement, but according to a newspaper report, they also burnt “his superb furniture, his rich wardrobe and some very capital pictures”. Now, I wonder if the burning of Mansfield’s possessions is a ghostly presence, to some extent, behind these bonfire scenes – it is possible - and including one in Wheatley’s “Riot in Broad Street”. Interestingly, the main thing going into the fire seems to be paintings and I am not sure about that one, whether that is a religious image or not. It is very difficult to see.

While we have come to recognise those kinds of scenes as symbolic of tyranny, intolerance and even totalitarianism, and maybe rightly so, but back in 1780, maybe it was possible to see things differently. At least one newspaper report referred to a Republican frenzy in the burning of Mansfield’s possessions, so we are dealing here with iconoclasm, possibly iconoclastic power.

Henry Angelo, another observer, noted that the captives marched out – this is of Newgate – “with all the humours of war, accompanied by a musical band of rattling fetters,” as if it was some kind of carnival or theatrical performance.

Let us go back to the three images. I am suggesting that the first way in which we might challenge that very negative stereotype of the mindless mob therefore is through this idea of carnival or street theatre, and I want to look at a second aspect of the construction of spectacle, which is the presence of spectators within the scene itself.

This technique was pioneered by Hogarth. Here is a well-known painting, I am sure you will know it, “The March to Finchley”, from 1750. This shows the crowd celebrating the despatch of the Army. You can just see them there, marching, although they are in the background and the main focus is on all this interesting stuff here at the front, who were going off to fight the Jacobite invaders in 1745 – remember, the Jacobites supporting the
unnatural illumination quickly took on diabolical associations. "Who can think on the late dreadful Fire without
Dryden, quote, "Night came, but without darkness or repose, a dismal picture of the general doom." This
reason for that is because there could have been nothing as terrifying as London burning through the night. For
Londoners were probably more likely to feel that "God's bellows blew the coals", as one observer put it, and the
paved and all divine with gold". But, in 1666, at the time, this would have seemed a distant dream, and
whereas London could, at least in theory, be rebuilt and emerge as a New Jerusalem, in Dryden's words, "silver-
the saddest spectacle," there is that word again, "that is this day in England." Of course, that is an exaggeration,
what is it now but another Sodom, lying in ashes – what is it but a heap of dust and rubbish? Surely London is
heaven". Another preacher, Samuel Rolle, declared that London had been the glory of the whole world, "But
According to a preacher, Thomas Vincent, both Sodom and London were destroyed by, quote, "fire from
the Beast, 1666, with the Great Fire.
On your religious and political views here, London was either being punished for the execution of Charles I, the
removal of the Stuart monarchy, who were ousted in 1688/1689.
The crowd is framed by tall houses, from which spectators, mainly women, not all of them reputable, I am told,
are viewing the scene, so this makes it a spectacle, this viewing, as long as you are at a certain distance, as
Burke put it. If you get a bit too close, there may be problems, as for the drunken Freemason who seems to be
part of this rather strange disorderly scene – this is in Hogarth's earlier print, "Night". We have this coach
overturned, trying to avoid this bonfire, so some similarities.
Apparently, that is Charles I. There are some sneaking, according to Ronald Paulson, a fine art critic, some
sneaking Jacobite sympathies about this print, so it is, in its own way, quite disturbing.

In the Newgate print, there are a variety of spectators, on the fringes of the scene, as you can see. Some of
them, in order to remind us about the danger of getting too close, one is having his pocket picked. This just
raises the whole question of spectating, including possibly what we are doing today, spectating these images. It
is more problematic than it might seem - you know, what is that fascination? Certainly, the presence of
spectators, particularly well-dressed spectators, because the dress code mattered far more, did it not, in the
eighteenth century, well-dressed spectators was problematic in the reportage. Frederic Reynolds, again,
complained about, “persons decently dressed, who appeared to be incited to extravagance by a species of
fanatical frenzy". Possibly, this anxiety, worked up to its highest level, is about the actual failure of the London
militia to intervene.

James Boswell said that the timidity of London authorities, by refusing to read the Riot Act, had turned the
soldiers, or the militia rather, the volunteers, into “tame spectators” of the conflagration. In other words, if you
take that line, this whole thing really was a huge stage-managed spectacle by the political opposition to
emarrass the Government, and the fact that the city burned through the night was actually perfect because it
is brilliant propaganda. It is a PR/spindoctor’s dream because it is creating this sense of doom and apocalypse.
As Edmund Burke reminded us, night-time is always more sublime than daytime because it increases our terror
more than anything else.

This brings me to the third aspect of this sense of spectacle, which I am calling the apocalyptic tone, this sense
of cosmic vengeance being visited on London. Well, of course, the last time this had really surfaced was the
Great Fire, the last time that London had been so devastated, and if you do not know about it then have a look at
the exhibits in the museum. “No event in our history bears any analogy with that styled the “Gordon Riots””,
said the poet Mary Robinson, “excepting the Fire of London in the reign of Charles II.” You can think immediately
of some parallels, can you not?

The scale of the destruction and the amount of time for which the fires burned remind you of the Great Fire and
its destruction. It burned for four days between second and sixth of September 1666, destroying about 80% of
the old City of London, including three of its most important buildings: the Royal Exchange, which was the
financial centre; the Guild Hall, the seat of London Government; and of course, the old St Paul's Cathedral. I
guess you could say we would not have had the new one, of course, had that Fire not taken place – very unlikely
I think. According to the poet John Dryden, “the town's one half”, in other words half of the whole of the city,
was reduced to what he called "rubbish". At its peak, on seventh of September, one historian has claimed you
could see the flames as far away as Oxford.

Of course, the other parallel was this apocalyptic mood. The seventeenth century was perhaps more prone to
this, but it is an important parallel. Many observers were in little doubt about the significance of the Great Fire.
“The whole was the effect of the heavy hand of God on us for our sins,” as one observer put it. Now, depending
on your religious and political views here, London was either being punished for the execution of Charles I, the
regicides, or it was being punished for the restoration of a Catholic decadent and corrupt court – you take your
choice there, depending on your persuasion. So, London is punished with a plague in 1665 and then the mark of
the Beast, 1666, with the Great Fire.

There were precedents in classical literature and biblical literature for destroying cities, Troy being the most
famous one. I guess we could add Jerusalem at different times. But the main precedent for a destroyed sinful
city was of course Sodom and Gomorrah.

According to a preacher, Thomas Vincent, both Sodom and London were destroyed by, quote, “fire from
heaven". Another preacher, Samuel Rolle, declared that London had been the glory of the whole world, “But
what is it now but another Sodom, lying in ashes – what is it but a heap of dust and rubbish? Surely London is
the saddest spectacle,” there is that word again, “that is this day in England.” Of course, that is an exaggeration,
in the sense that Sodom, as far as I know – correct me if I’m wrong – was instantly and irrevocably destroyed,
whereas London could, at least in theory, be rebuilt and emerge as a New Jerusalem, in Dryden’s words, “silver-
paved and all divine with gold". But, in 1666, at the time, this would have seemed a distant dream, and
Londoners were probably more likely to feel that “God's bellows blew the coals", as one observer put it, and the
reason for that is because there could have been nothing as terrifying as London burning through the night. For
Dryden, quote, “Night came, but without darkness or repose, a dismal picture of the general doom.” This
unnatural illumination quickly took on diabolical associations. “Who can think on the late dreadful Fire without

restoration of the Stuart monarchy, who were ousted in 1688/1689.
some serious reflection on the more dreadful fire of hell?” said Samuel Rolle.

MP and diarist Samuel Pepys described the Fire as, quote, “a most horrid malicious bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire”. "The stones of St Paul’s flew like grenades, the melting lead running down the streets in a stream, and the very pavements flowing with fiery redness.”

John Evelyn, the other famous diarist of this period, was even more graphic: “Oh, the miserable and calamitous spectacle such as, happily, the world has not seen since the foundation of it, nor can be outdone till the universal conflagration thereof. The noise and cracking and thunder of the impetuous flames, the shrieking of women and children, the fall of towers, houses and churches, was like a hideous storm. I left it burning, the semblance of Sodom, for the last day.”

You may already see some similarities though, in the discourse there, with descriptions of the burning of Newgate.

It is possible that the Great Fire maybe even influenced Milton, our greatest poet, because Paradise Lost is only published a year later, or the ten book version, the first version, and of course it opens with the fallen angels on the burning lake, “As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames, no light, but rather darkness visible…” a term that has been much used, William Golding and other people, “served only to discover sights of woe”. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the people describing the Gordon Riots drew on Milton. Poet George Crabbe, said that the rioters attacking Newgate appeared “rolled in black smoke, mixed with sudden bursts of fire, like Milton’s infernals.”

We can push this parallel between the Great Fire and the Gordon Riots a bit further because the one really iconic moment was the burning down of the old St Paul’s. John Evelyn said of this scene, and when I read his words out, think of the description of Langdale’s distillery and the burning alcohol running down the middle of the street. “The stones of St Paul’s flew like grenades, the melting lead running down the streets in a stream, and the very pavements flowing with fiery redness.”

One reason - and I just want to mention a further possible important precedent here - one reason why St Paul’s went up in flames like it did, partly because it was being rebuilt after being vandalised by Cromwell and his troops - I think they kept horses in there - was that local booksellers, ironically, had put hundreds and hundreds of books, hoping for safekeeping, in there, but of course when the books went up, the thing really did burn. I am just saying that possibly this association of cultural catastrophe, all these books being lost, with urban conflagration is also setting a precedent for the Gordon Riots.

I think also, looking beyond the Gordon Riots, the Bristol Reform Bill Riots, which again I have written about elsewhere, one of the key moments there was attacking the cathedral and burning its library. If you go to Bristol and look at the library, there is still a plague referring to the mob, the attack by the mob. In fact, of course, this was to get the vote for the middle class in the Reform Bill of 1831, so “mob” is hardly adequate to describe the social composition – maybe the actions.

Just as important I think was the response of artists to the Great Fire. How did one represent, after all, the scale of the destruction? Well, one way to do it was just to stick smoke and flames onto existing topographical views, and I wonder if that is one reason why these spectators seem almost like they are having a picnic, because I suspect they were looking at the previous scene, which did not have the smoke and flames. A bit crude but, on the other hand, it does give the sense of scale, as all those iconic buildings on the skyline. The tall buildings are usually representing power of some kind, they are consumed. I think you can see that super-impositional technique at work here of course, again, with Newgate, and again with the Bristol Riots.

The other style of realism that was pioneered though was to take you much closer to the flames, and the key image here, which of course is in this museum, which we think was by Jan Griffier, more or less in 1675, this is the Great Fire’s destruction of Newgate. They reproduced this image in the eighteenth century – and it is very diabolical, there are fleeing prisoners, smoke and flame, this general mood of menace and disorder. So, although it is not a riot, it has similar kinds of imagery at work, or conventions. As one press report puts it, “...impressing the mind of the spectator as if the whole metropolis was burning and all nations yielding to the final consummation of all things.”

Just another little footnote here, it is worth recording of course that the Great Fire was officially commemorated as a Catholic conspiracy, so the original inscription on Wren’s monument, just down the road, that was then chiselled off of course later, described the Fire as, quote, “a horrid plot, for the extirpating the Protestant religion and English liberties, and to introduce popery and slavery”. So, the Protestant terror of 1780 is settling that score for the Catholic atrocity of 1666. But that is really just a footnote.

The final part of the talk is to come back to these three key scenes and add on the fourth one, the “Riot in Broad Street”, which is next to Liverpool Street. What I think Francis Wheatley was trying to do in his print was to steady the nerves of the nation in their response to the riots and to introduce a correct sense of proportion and perspective, and I mean that in several senses, including art historical.
The original painting was commissioned by John and Josiah Boydell, who were leading printmakers and closely associated with the City of London. They were famous for the Shakespeare Gallery later on. The aim was to celebrate the actions, rather than the inactions, of the London militia when they had intervened to quell a riot that was taking place in Broad Street, where the crowd were attacking the house of a rich Irishman. It was finished in 1784, and Wheatley was paid something like £200, which was a huge amount of money in those days, and I think the amount of money being paid emphasises the importance of this visual statement, to correct the record about the riots. He was not an eyewitness but I think that adds to the sense of composure or distance.

There is no evidence it was ever displayed, the original painting, and then, somewhat ironically, it was lost in a fire at the home of the engraver! But fortunately, he had done the plate, so the engraving survived, and it was eventually published in September 1790, ten years later.

In fact of course, many engagements between troops and rioters, as I said, resulted in bloody carnage, as it would do because troops have rifles and rioters do not, so you put bullets against unarmed bodies and generally you are going to get carnage. But, as one critic has called this, this “carefully balanced” scene, it seems to me shows the soldiers or militia acting in a very restrained, even dignified, manner. Only one soldier seems to be shooting, as far as I can see, and the disciplined ranks of the colleagues receding back down the street there, as a statement of order – they have taken back the streets, or they are very close to taking back the streets.

There are only two injured rioters, one of whom is receiving attention from an officer, who might be Bernard Turner. It may be Bernard Turner – maybe people in the audience know.

Unlike the Newgate prints, the crowd do not occupy the whole canvas. They are squeezed into the left-hand side here, and the house they are looting is the equivalent of Newgate, is it not, but it is only got part of the action, not the whole thing.

The crowd are not caricatured, I do not think. There is a drunken woman, who may be modestly alluding to Gin Lane, I think, because I think she is neglecting her child – I could have done a detail but it is somewhere in there. But no one is dancing a jig, for sure, and there is no demagogues, there are no agitators or released prisoners brandishing leg-irons. Wheatley does, however, retain one of those most disturbing aspects, which is the bonfire, although it is a bit concealed, and the possessions being dropped out of the windows, some of them certainly going to be burned. However, I think the point here is that that motif now is countered by this. It has got that countervailing element in the picture to answer the crowd’s action. These elegant vistas, houses, receding into the distance have many spectators, again mainly female, at an appropriate distance.

I think all these features make “Riot on Broad Street” an effective piece of propaganda for the city authorities, challenging the view that they somehow colluded in the violence by not intervening early enough. However, what I want to say is that that only applies to this bottom half of the picture. What do we do with this? What do we do with the night-sky, the upper half?

It seems to me that this sublime night sky is echoing well-known romantic art, particularly by Joseph Wright of Derby, who painted a whole series of paintings of Vesuvius, and as you can see, there is the lunar break.

The inclusion of this night-sky in “Broad Street” is not a requirement of the reportage, is it, so what is it doing there? It certainly figures very prominently. As one critic noted, “When I first saw it, it struck me as an attempt to prove how very completely an artist could make a sky in a composition eclipse every other consideration.” Well, I think that is possibly going too far because I think it is a bit simplistic. Wheatley was not just showing off, saying that he could do a night-sky; he was trying to suggest that this kind of sublime effect belonged in its proper place - in other words, it belongs in high culture, it belongs with the representatives of order. But it is a risky business? I mean, for a start, it opens up over the bonfire, so is it blessing it? Or is it cursing it?

It is also true to say that romantic depictions of natural catastrophes, as Ronal Paulson said, were becoming to be associated with revolution, with what he called sedition, and this is 1790 of course now, when the print comes out, so it is one year into the French Revolution. Perhaps Wheatley’s fascination with the power of the crowd has forced its way out onto the canvas in a rather ambiguous way, and it is perhaps for this reason that he puts into the scene a reminder of the dangers of viewing, because it looks like this person looks to me like he is about to get hit over the head doffing his hat to spectating at the scene.

I want to end with more words from Edmund Burke, whose theory of the sublime has informed this talk. Burke said this: “This noble capital,” of course he means London, “the pride of England and Europe, I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to desire to see destroyed by conflagration or an earthquake, though he should be removed to the greatest distance from the danger. But, suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins.”

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